

AN INTERVIEW WITH NICOLE CHARLTON

BARBARA TABACH

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REMEMBERING 1 OCTOBER

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV LIBRARIES

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS & ARCHIVE

**Today is May 23rd, 2018. This is Barbara Tabach. I am sitting with Nicole in the Clark County Coroner's Office.**

**Nicole, say your name and spell it for us.**

Nicole Charlton; N-I-C-O-L-E, C-H-A-R-L-T-O-N.

**You were telling me a little bit about where you grew up. Here in Nevada?**

Yes, I was born in the Bay Area in Richmond, California, and at seven years old moved to Carlin, Nevada, which is right outside of Elko, about twenty-two miles west of Elko. The town only had about fifteen hundred people in it. I graduated with thirty-four people. That tells you how little it is. A great town. Played every sport. Cheerleader. Everything you can imagine, I did. Luckily, because there were no tryouts, everybody made the team. We had to go to Elko for groceries, the theater, anything. If you were going to town, you go to town and that's what we do did.

Then in 1990 I graduated high school and moved down to Vegas to go to UNLV. I lived in the dorms for a couple of years and then got my own apartment. My sister was going to UNR. She decided to jump down to UNLV, and we had an apartment together. It was great. It was good.

**What did you study at UNLV?**

Criminal justice. I majored in criminal justice with a minor in biology. I knew I wanted to do some type of crime. I wanted to be an attorney, but I also liked science. I took all the sciences I could, but majored in criminal justice. My goal was to graduate and either go in the military, air force, or go to law school; I couldn't decide. Unfortunately, my senior year I met a guy and that took priority and I didn't go to law school. Since then I've taken the LSAT and I did pretty good. I just haven't applied to law school.

**You can always go back.**

I can always go, right?

**You can always go. It's never too late to pursue that.**

Yes.

**How did you come to work in the coroner's office here?**

My senior year in college I got a part-time job. No, I had just graduated and I got a part-time job at the public administrator's office, which is right next door. What they do is, at the time, when a person died in Vegas—it's a very transient town. You know that. When a person dies and they don't have family here, the public administrator, the investigator, would go to the house, the scene, wherever it was, get all the personal possessions, and lock up the house, or if it were a homeless person, take all their valuables, until we can contact family, and then we would ship that to the family. Sometimes it would be a house and we'd box up everything in the house and put it up for auction if the family didn't want to come here. Sometimes we couldn't find family, so it would just go to auction. It was a very good job. It was in the death business, but at the same time, I was an investigator. It really wasn't what I wanted to do. I left there and did a few odd jobs.

My mom told me she always wanted to own a mortuary. And I said, "Well, you know what? I'll go to embalmer school and we'll just run a mortuary together." When I was thirty years old, somewhere around there, I got married and moved to Sacramento where a mortuary school was. During school we did a tour of the coroner's office down there and I loved it. I fell in love with it. I quit school and worked at the coroner's office full time doing autopsies five days a week.

Then all my family slowly from Carlin moved to Vegas, so all my family was here. I

said, "I've got to get back to family." I got divorced, moved back here, and started at the coroner's office here. There was an opening, so I moved back here doing autopsies.

**There wasn't a coroner's office before?**

There was. There was, yes. There was an opening here. I told my husband, my future ex-husband, "I'm going back to Vegas."

I'm not a fan of this town. I never have been. I'm a small town girl and that's what I like. It's too many people. It's just too big. It's not my style. But family is so important. Family is so important.

I moved back here and started here doing autopsies. I worked back there for a year and didn't know John. I knew he was going to be the corner. He called me at home one day and he said, "I need a secretary and I want you." I said, "I've never been a secretary in my life. I have no idea what to do. I cut up bodies; that's what I do." He said, "Let's try it out." I interviewed and I've been with him for eight years now. He's an amazing boss. We're like brother and sister. We can just read each other's minds. It's been great.

My family is still here and we have family dinner every other Sunday and it's wonderful. I'm married to an amazing man.

**Life has worked out.**

Life has definitely worked out, yes. This is a little off topic, but I had a liver transplant in 2002. I needed a liver and I had a transplant. My ex-husband gave me half his liver. It's a great love story. I could go on for hours about it. We had that in 2002, so it's been sixteen years, and we're both going strong.

**That's good.**

Yes, it's great. I'm very pro organ donation. I'm a volunteer with the organ procurement

organization here. I think it's a wonderful gift to give, whatever it is, whether it's your cornea, your skin or tissue, whatever. It's an amazing, amazing thing.

**I'm right there with you. I think that's very important.**

Yes. My father just passed and he wasn't an organ donor. He didn't believe in it. To each his own.

**You respect it.**

Yes. He saw how it helped me, but at the same time...It is what it is.

**Interesting.**

Yes, yes.

**That kind of gets us, at least in an overview way, into this office. In talking about October first, which this interview is specifically for that project, what were you doing on October first? Where were you? How did you learn the news?**

I was home prepping for a colonoscopy. It's funny now, but it wasn't funny then, obviously. That was a Sunday. I had Monday off for the procedure, of course. I actually took that whole week off. I told John, "I hadn't had a vacation in a long time. I'm taking that week off." Sunday night I was home with my husband. I drank what you're supposed to drink to make everything happen. I'm sitting in bed. It was about eleven, ten forty-five, something around there, and I saw it on the news. We sat in bed and looked up at the TV and there it was.

I got a text from John and he said, "Conference call, fifteen minutes, all of management." I got everybody on the phone. Everybody had a job. John just put everybody to work. *You do this; you do this; you do this.* We all hung up. He called me right back and he said, "This is the real deal, Nicole. I need you to come pick me up." And I said, "John, I can't leave my house. This is what's going on." He said, "You need to cancel your procedure and come pick me up. We're

going to the office." And I said, "Okay, I can go to the office. There's a restroom there."

I picked him up from his house. He said, "We're going to the scene." I thought, *I can't go to the scene and I can't do this*. We did. I drove while he had a phone in each ear, and I'm doing my best to pay attention to the road and think about all the things he's dealing with.

We get down to the Strip and we stop at the command center and he speaks to the sheriff or the undersheriff. Everybody had that same look on their face, *what just happened?* It's like a war zone face. Making stuff happen. Making it happen, but it's still at the same time unbelievable. The undersheriff took us down to the scene, so just he and I were there. We walked into the scene and it was the most surreal thing you've ever seen. It was windy that night. It was really windy. We got there about one in the morning, I guess. There were red Solo cups and water bottles just being blown everywhere.

From my vantage point, CSI was there with Metro and they were doing their thing. I could see seventeen bodies. I counted seventeen bodies. I looked up at Mandalay Bay and I saw the drapes flying through the window. Obviously, I knew very little. I knew a shooter from that window hit all these people, and I thought, *okay, there's seventeen*. I asked the CSI, "How many do you count?" He said, "I count seventeen in here." There was a divider from the stage over and there were more bodies over there that I couldn't see.

John was on the phone with the sheriff or the governor, whoever. I have a phone and they're calling me and I'm calling. It's just constant. "Okay, John, here, talk to this person." I was his constant go-to.

I never left far from the porta-potty. God was looking down. I don't know. Everything just puckered up and I didn't have an issue down there. I didn't have an issue, so it was wonderful.

Our investigators ended up showing up around four a.m. and they took over. John and I came back to the office. The people who were working at that time...It was organized chaos. It was beautiful to watch. They knew what they had to do. They were doing it. But they were all in shock. People were coming who were off. "What can I do? What can I do?" It was beautiful to see everybody come together. I'm on the phone with admin all that night saying, "Get up, get up, get up. This is what's going on. You don't have to come to the office right now, but be prepared." I was trying to get everybody organized back here while he was handling the political side—not the political side, but trying to get the help we needed, trying to get the assistance we needed, (demart) teams and other offices, like a few people from New York came to assist us. We have those connections out there. He was getting calls from everybody saying, "Do you need help? Do you need help?" San Bernardino. It was a constant, *what can we do to help you?*

When we got back here, I set up the unidentified victim identification system. When you file a missing person, it's a whole software, and so I set that up. I made an incident and got all that taken care of. I've done a lot of training throughout the country with family assistance centers. John looked at me and he said, "You are my manager." They call it FAC, family assistance center. "You're my FAC manager." He had left with not the fire chief, but John Steinbeck is his name. They were looking for a family assistance center and they came across the one at the convention center. When he came back here—he might have called me, I don't know—he said, "Get to the convention center. You're running it."

At ten a.m. I left here and I went there. It was my first one and it was...I don't even know the word...numbing. There's all these people coming up to me, all these family members. They finally got word; *family members, go to the family assistance center at the convention center*. All these people are coming up and I'm trying to create sign in sheets and get volunteers. It was

madness. I'm trying to run this. I'm on no sleep. I'm having to use the restroom. It was a pretty stressful time. I'm having family members come up to me, blood head to toe, head to toe.

I'll never forget this man. He said, "I need to know where my wife is. I left her there. She was shot." It was all her blood. He said, "Someone pulled me off of her and made me run away. I don't know if she's dead. I don't know if she's in the hospital. I don't know where she is." I didn't know at the time. He introduced himself, but I had no idea of any of the decedents' names or even how many there were by then. I had no idea.

There ended up being twenty-nine out there at the scene because there were some that ran, ran down Tropicana and ran on the Strip, so there were bodies, not just the seventeen I could see. When I heard twenty-nine, I was just floored.

I did my best with what I was trained to do that night—or that whole day. I left there around...oh, God, I don't even know...ten or eleven that night. Of course, I couldn't sleep, so I was back at it at five o'clock the next morning, I was there.

I had some ladies from Reno come down. I don't know if you remember the Reno air crash? They ran a family assistance center up there. They came down to assist me. "Okay, this is what you need." I'd forget about this and they would remind me. That was very, very helpful.

There was a fire captain by the name of Ryan Glassford who was my right-hand, and we still keep in touch. He's an amazing, amazing man. You have that connection when you go through something like that with somebody. You just have that connection. It was good to see him in the morning. I'm like, "Okay, Ryan, let's do this together."

I was there for four days, just the day. The Reno girls actually came and they worked the graveyard shift for me. I would leave like at nine p.m. and come back at five. They would be organized and have stuff together, and I would just do what I had to do.



I had no idea what was going on back here, no clue. I know John was jumping back from the FAC to here and to press conferences. You saw him on TV quite a bit. He was a hot mess, but he was amazing. He just made stuff happen.

I come back here, and the bodies were already released by the time I got back here on the fourth day or fifth day. I'm pretty sure they were all, for the most part, released and IDed, so that was beautiful.

We were on lockdown, I guess you want to call it. We had officers outside our door for a good month twenty-four hours a day because of the nonsense we had out here, conspiracy theorists or just different people wanted to get in the building. But at the same time, Barbara, we still had our thirty deaths a day that Vegas has. It's just not 1 October. The town didn't stop. Our investigators were still have to deal with the hospital deaths and the naturals at home and all that, so we had family members wanting to come get their everyday property; we had our admin staff who was helping those people.

All the processes we knew up until that date were different. Everything we're doing is different now. We all had to relearn, relearn all of that.

**When you say "it's different now," it's because of the impact of what you went through?**

Yes, yes.

**You never really went back to whatever you were before, system-wise, is that what you're saying?**

No. At the time we were on lockdown. Phones were going unanswered. We weren't answering phones. We weren't releasing property like we normally did.

**Oh, I see, so that period of time.**

During that period, yes, nothing was the same, and so we all had to get used to that. Even now

we have a lock on the front door; that was never like that; we have the buzzer. That only happened after 1 October. It's just one little thing.

We have yoga now and meditation and that's an amazing thing. I do yoga every morning. I was telling our yoga instructor this morning, "I don't know if it's just since 1 October or the fact that I'm getting older"—I mean, I'm forty-six years old; maybe that's it—"but I find myself living for the moment." If I'm in a situation where I don't want to be, whether it's just somebody being snotty or I'm just not happy with that situation, I'll just get up and leave. I wear it on my face. I wear it on my face, and my husband says, "You need to check your face," because I do. I don't know if it's since 1 October, but I don't need to put up with nonsense. Life is too short. I'm finding out a lot about myself.

**That's interesting because that's always one of the questions we like to ask in these interviews is what you learned about yourself from that experience.**

I do a lot of meditation, a lot of it, whether it be I'm lying in bed and I can't turn my mind off, I just meditate just for five minutes and it puts me right to sleep, so I've learned to do that. I ride a Harley and I meditate on the bike and it's such good therapy for me. We just took a really long road trip on the bike. I get off and I do yoga, in the convenience store parking lot. I don't care. I do it for my own mind and my own sanity. I love it. I love it and I just...I'm going to start crying now.

We have a conference here. I don't know if John mentioned it. It's the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners.

**No, he didn't.**

He is the secretary of that association. There's one employee and I'm it; I'm the administrator of that organization, and that's my second job. At four-thirty I clock out and I turn my hat around

and I come back to this office and I run an association. We have a huge conference every July at the Golden Nugget. It's a death investigation conference. We have four- to five hundred people. We have thirty speakers. It's a big deal. He and I organize that. It's a lot of work. That's in July of every year.

July 15th, my dad passed away, which I still haven't dealt with. Then the conference happened. I had to put on my cute face for the conference, just like a week later. The last week in July is the conference. I had August to kind of get over it, kind of work with my mom. They were married fifty-two years. We spent a lot of time with her. She had three girls, so we're all here, me and my sisters are here. Then 1 October hit. Oh, God, it was awful. It was a rough six months. My husband was supportive. He was amazing.

Now the conference is coming up again, and I'm here at four o'clock every morning getting stuff ready. That's what all this nonsense is. It's coming up again and we're having to deal with that. He's still dealing with 1 October stuff. I'm still getting emails constantly from the public wanting reports or answers or something about 1 October related. Our day is not totally consumed with 1 October, but it still lingers and it's Memorial Day. They're not forgotten. Just because the bodies are out of our house doesn't mean that we don't deal with it still every day. It's a constant. It really is. But he's busy and I'm throwing conference stuff at him. That's the last thing he needs to deal with it, but it's got to be done. We thought about canceling it, but, we thought, *no, let's do it*. People count on it. They really do.

**It's held in Vegas annually?**

Every year, yes, every year.

**People come from all over?**

International, too. We've got a guy coming from Pakistan this year. It's international.

**It's hard to ask. The programming, will you be dealing with our event?**

Yes, John will be speaking four hours on the lessons we learned. Then we have four hours or maybe it's three hours of Joanna O'Flaherty. She is a Ph.D. psychologist, psychiatrist, whatever she is. She has spoken to our staff quite a few times and she is speaking on a wellness program to keep your people well. She's dealt with all kinds of plane crashes and everything in New York and is very well versed in traumatic PTSD, everything we've gone through. She's been incredible. I don't know who, but I've heard some of our people even see her on the outside and she's been incredible.

Yes, we will be discussing...And he travels and talks about 1 October now. I don't know how he does it because he's still a hot mess, too. I would tell that to his face, actually. He doesn't think he is, but I know him well. Yes, it's been rough. It's been rough. But I think we're all...

What's funny is our investigators see the worst of it. They go to the scene and they deal with the families. They see death and they deal with the families. The body comes here and, forensics, we do the autopsies and we deal with it back there, too. Our admin staff, we talk to the families and they're distraught. We all deal with death and we all have our own stresses, but the investigators don't seem to take advantage of the wellness stuff, the yoga and the meditation, because they're so busy and they think they can't spare half an hour to go do this. It's a real shame. I see it. I see it in their faces and I see that what used to go from zero to sixty, it snaps now; they just snap. I'm like, "Okay, we all need this. We all need this. Whether you think so or not, you need this." But it's changed all of us. It really has.

Some people have said to me, "You deal with death every day. What's fifty-eight in one day?" "That's not what it was. So if you want to think that, okay, and, yes, we deal with death every day."

I'll never forget, Barbara, at the family assistance center, one of our investigators, her name is Michelle, she was on her sixth death notification. She would bring in a family. She would go out to the main lobby and she'd call, "Can I have the Smith family?" The Smith family would come in the room and she would give them the property and it's bloody or whatever.

**This is at FAC?**

Yes, at the FAC. We would clean it as best we could before we got it over there. But, "Here is her ID. Here is her wristband. Here is her hair ties." Whatever, her rings. "Confirmation that your loved one is dead. That's confirmation. This is where your loved one is." *Da, da, da*. She did six of those in a row. She came out after the sixth one and I looked at her and the look on her face...I said, "You need to go home now. Don't go back to the office, just go home." You're just not the same after that. You do it every day. Yes, you can go do a death notification, one a day. They work four days a week. Maybe you don't do one a day. Who knows? But to do six in an hour was too much to ask anybody, so I sent her home. It's a trying, trying job, and they have a tough job out there. I just tried to control the madness and control the chaos; that was my part I played, and tried to get him to where he needed to be; at the same time being his secretary and his calendar keeper. "Okay, you need to be here. You have a press conference at eleven. Make sure you're there." It was trying, for sure.

**But you do your job well and you know it's an important job.**

Yes, yes.

**Thank goodness you were here.**

Yes. And thank goodness that I had the training I had; that he allowed me the training. I thought, *oh, Vegas will be the last place to get hit*. Then when it happens, you're like, *okay, training*; training kicks in. The help that came from the different counties and the different states, I can't

thank them enough; a thank-you card just isn't...

**Do you find yourself as events have happened, like school shootings and churches and such, do you reach out to other people because of this experience that you've had?**

It's funny that you say that. This stuff right here in the corner? When the Parkland shooting happened in Broward County, our investigator staff, all of them wrote letters and cards. I had a stack from all our investigators. I mailed them to Broward County saying, "We are thinking of you." They mailed all this stuff back with cards saying, "Thank you, we appreciate the thought."

**With patches from—**

Yes.

**Oh, I love it. I've gone to Broward. I used to work for a company in Broward County, so that was very close to where I was at.**

We reach out to each of the counties where that happens. We just reached out to Harris County for the shooting this past Friday.

**In Texas?**

In Texas. We just reached out to them. Both with the international association, being a Coroners and Medical Examiners Association, we like to, "What can we do to help?" Then John reaches out as Clark County Coroner saying, "We want to help. What do you need from us?"

Additionally, neighboring counties—San Bernardino, with the married couple, the shooting, you remember that? We reached out to them and said, "We're right here. We're neighbors. We'll come down and help." I don't remember how many died in that shooting, but it wasn't so massive that they couldn't do it themselves. Yes, we reach out for sure. Every single mass shooting we reach out, even in New York. A really good friends of ours, he's a commissioner there and we reach out. They deal with multiple deaths five, six, seven in a car, whatever, all the time, but we

still reach out, "Can we do anything?" They're like, "Pfft, small-town Vegas, we don't need your help." I mean, they're thankful. They appreciate the help, but they don't need any of that from us, but we put it out there because we understand. We get it.

**You're all part of the same group of professionals.**

Yes. And now unfortunately we're a family of people who know each other. We know what you're experiencing. We get it.

**Anything else you'd like to share with me? These were amazing aspects.**

I can't think of anything. I just know our office were all rock stars. We got these people all IDed, all fifty-eight of them, quickly, and got the families on their way.

The services that came forward at the family assistance center—from Allegiant Airlines and all these different airlines that were shipping families to and fro for free or discounted and the hotels—it was just incredible. And the donations, we had to stop donations. It was incredible. We all must have gained twenty pounds that week. You look at somebody and you're like, "Make sure you eat; make sure you eat." But you grab a piece of pizza as you're walking. The amount of donations.

Matter of fact, Bishop Gorman High School, a representative showed up at the door and had two tubs of cellophane-wrapped balls and in each ball—there was one for each of our employees—there was sunflower seeds and granola bars and different things to keep you going and then there was a gift card to an Italian restaurant in Summerlin and each one was fifty bucks. I passed them out; I put one in everybody's box. Just those things...The kids did it. The kids just wanted to do something. We had one group of kids come through on a double-decker bus and just wanted to give us a plaque. I shouldn't say "just wanted to." They want to do something. Lots of water. I had emails and emails and emails of people, church groups and everything.

"What can we do? What do you need? What do you need?" The outpouring was just amazing.

**It had to be comforting.**

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. This town just came together. Now with the Golden Knights, we're one big happy team, right?

**That's right.**

Go Knights, go. I think it has really helped this town, don't you?

**I totally agree with you. I loved hockey before, but not to this level. This is amazing.**

Yes. The energy, the energy that this town is feeling right now is something else. I've got to compare. I'm thinking. When Katrina hit New Orleans, the New Orleans Saints won that year, the Super Bowl. I said, "This has got to be the same. It's got to feel the same." The energy is just...Hockey is feeling it. Have you been to a game yet?

**Oh, yes. I've only been to one, but I've watched a lot of it on it TV. It's interrupted my regular viewing. Hours of it.**

Yes, yes. The energy in that building is phenomenal. It's a good time.

One other thing, a personal thing. One October was on a Sunday. That following weekend was BikeFest downtown. My husband and I always go. There's bands on Fremont Street and just vendors. We went. I had worked all that week, of course. On Saturday I told John, "If you need me, I'll work." The place was still going hot and heavy. He's like, "Nope, take some time. Do what you've got to do with Brandon." We went downtown and I felt so guilty. I felt so guilty that I was watching a concert with all these people around me; yet, there was Metro on scaffolding, looking down on the crowds just in case. I mean, it was only a week later. You're looking around and you're thinking, *how easy, how easy it would be for someone to just open a window and that hotel is right there*. I wasn't scared. I wasn't worried. But at the same time, I



thought, *God, it would just be so easy.* Then I felt guilty. I'm like, *I'm down here enjoying my time and there's people in their house that are still...* It's just such a shame. But it was Uncle Kracker. He's good. He was really good to watch. We didn't stay long. Brandon could see it in my eyes. We got out of there.

**You weren't that...**

No. I didn't need to be in that. I would have rather been here helping, doing what I could.

**But you're taking care of yourself with the wellness and all that.**

Oh, yes, doing great, yes. The liver is functioning good, doing everything good. I even took my medicine that week; I remembered that. That was tough. It was a tough week.

**Did you get your colonoscopy?**

Eventually, yes. And they didn't charge me. I called them and I said, "Are you going to charge me for a rescheduling fee?" They're like, "Heck no. We know what you're doing right now. There's no rescheduling fee." Yes, in January I finally had it redone. I had to drink that stuff twice. That's the worst.

**That's the worst.**

Yes, I got my colonoscopy. That's funny. Yes, I got it redone.

**This adds a lot. I really appreciate this tremendously.**

Good, I'm glad.

**Thank you so much.**

Yes, of course.

**[End of recorded interview]**